

Sermon, 9-10-17

Holy Spirit Cumming

This morning we begin an adventure. People in this parish have purchased over 130 copies of *The Path*. It is a survey of the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. We have a plan to read a chapter from *The Path* over 24 of the next 32 weeks. On eight other Sundays we will read the regular lectionary, either because it is a special day, like All Saints; or because it is likely to be a “low” Sunday, like before fall break. The chapters assigned are listed on the special bookmark, so get one if you haven’t already. Jeff will also put the next Sunday’s reading assignment in the bulletin insert each week.

So why are we doing this? The simple answer is because the Bible is important and it is often hard for many of us to understand. The Bible is central to our faith. Not just our faith, but the faith of many other people in our country and around the world. Individuals and churches use it in different ways. Many people ignore the Bible (or try to). Some spend a fair amount of energy attacking the Bible; sometimes with sound scholarship, but often setting up straw man arguments against what they think the Bible says.

So we are going to read it for ourselves. Not all of it, but a survey of the main stories so that we get to better know the Bible better. This may inspire us to read more of it on our own. Some of us may even join an EFM group next fall so we can go deeper in our study. By the end of April of 2018, we will know the Bible better, not just from what we read and the sermons and lessons we hear; but also from having conversations with others here at church and in our homes and other settings. It is my hope that this common reading will open our hearts and our minds and strengthen our faith in the God of the Bible and our loving service in the world.

In our world today—with hurricanes approaching, people in Texas and India recovering from floods, earthquakes in Mexico, the threat of war in Korea, and division here in the U.S.-- it is easy for us to lose ourselves in despair or distraction. We need to stay aware of all those things and respond in real world ways to work for justice and help people in need. To do that, we need a faith that holds us steady in the midst of turmoil. The Bible, read in community and with prayer and sound scholarship, can help us have that type of faith. So let’s begin!

This week, we have read chapter 1 of *The Path*. It is basically the first three chapters of Genesis, the book of beginnings in the Hebrew Bible. The way this will work going forward is that we will read the assigned chapter from *The Path* on our own as we are able; then the preacher will select just one part of the chapter to be read in church and to be the main focus of the sermon. This week, as we just heard, I chose Genesis 1:26-2:3, one part of the Hebrew poem of creation.

Studying this part of the Bible exposes us to “first things,” that is things that really matter to help us discern who we are as human beings and how to live our lives. Our belief that God created humans in God’s image is one of the most important first things. So the obvious

first questions include-- What does it mean to be created in God's image? What is God like? And in what ways are humans like God?

Well, if we look at this first chapter of Genesis, this beautiful poem of creation, this litany of how God made all that is, we learn this about what God is like—**God uses language to create goodness**. Part of that divine creative process includes separating things, making things different as part of that created goodness. As one example, listen to these verses from earlier in the creation poem in Genesis:

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God saw the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

God speaks. Goodness comes. And part of that goodness includes differentiation within God's creation but without judgment. Darkness is not called “bad,” it is simply different from light. In fact, darkness is needed in order for light to be. That is how God creates, that is who God is; and if we are made in God's image, then that is who we are, too. Humans at our best use language to create goodness; and part of that goodness includes appreciating differences.

In addition to being made in God's image, we learn two more “first things” about who we are as human beings:

- God put us in charge—humans have received responsibility from God for God's creation. God remains the owner of all that is; we are God's appointed caretaker.
- Our God-made goodness includes diversity like other parts of creation. We are made male and female without any sense that one is better than the other.

So the Bible informs us that our human identity is an extension of God's creative goodness—we are like God in that we can use our language to bless and create goodness. We are to appreciate how things are different but without judging those differences as good or bad. In fact, we are to recognize the goodness in the differences. And we are to take care of what God has created, remembering who the owner is.

As we consider the implications from these “first things” in this creation poem, you may notice something is missing-- there is no mention of sin (that will come next week). Theologian Richard Rohr talks about our “original goodness” as opposed to the Church doctrine of original sin. When we reflect on and imagine who we are as human beings, one of the “first things” that matter about us is our goodness. God doesn't make junk.

So these ancient words give us hope and help to shape us in how we live today. In our current world, it can feel overwhelming. This biblical faith in who we are and how we are to live can feel naïve. Today we are often divided politically and even morally. Some division is necessary—we need to identify what is harmful or unjust so we can work to change it. But we also need to realize that many of our differences are a blessed part of God's good creation.

So in the midst of political debates and heated conflict, we need to remember that our words matter. So with God's help, let us pray to appreciate the goodness in others. Let us use our language to acknowledge and bless when people do things like rescuing their neighbors in Texas. Let us pray to see the whole human family as God does—different colors and languages, shapes and sizes, and so much more! Returning to first things—that we are all made in God's image-- can help us do this so we live differently in how we relate to one another.

As caretakers and stewards of creation, we need to return to first things, too. Imagine what it would be like to have the owner come back and ask us for an accounting of how we have been running things. Is the land in good shape? The oceans? The air? The plants and animals? Are we doing things the way God would want us to do them? Or are we taking shortcuts to enrich ourselves? A faithful caretaker does what is best for the owner.

And even when creation is scary—like the last few weeks when people have experienced Harvey and Irma and the fires out west and so much more—our role as caretakers challenges us to pay attention. Storms and fires and other disasters are part of reality. Yet as good caretakers, we need to ask-- Is there something we are doing that is making things worse? If there is, are we willing to change? Is there a way for us to be better prepared? Is there a way to protect the vulnerable who always seem to be hurt the worst? How can we help after the storm, after the disaster? Being made in God's image, we have agency to act proactively as well as after the disaster so that we are better stewards of God's creation-- including one another.

There is one more “first thing” we read this morning: Rest. We are told God rested. That may seem like a silly thing for God to do. Why does God need to rest? God rested as a divine example for humans. Rest is a divine interruption to our lives so that we remember who we are and how we are to live. Here is what Jesus said,

“The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.”

The Sabbath is more than a religious rule. It is a holy rest that is integral to our identity as humans made in God's image. At least one day a week, we need to check out from “running the world” to appreciate and enjoy creation's goodness. That is a very important first thing for us to remember today. Here is how the poet Wendell Berry put it—

“To rest, go to the woods
Where what is made is made
Without your thought or work.”

If we rest like that, regularly, then when we do get back to our work as caretakers, we will probably do it more like God intended.

So today, this week, we launch our adventure on *The Path*. As we do, remember these first things: the Bible matters. Our words matter. God's creation and our part in it matter. Rest

matters. I look forward to going with you on this journey into what God intends for us as God's image bearers in creation. Amen.